

The Culture of Nature: Destination Visitability in Ilulissat, Greenland

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Abstract: Tourism is increasingly a focal point for polar communities due to its potential for diversifying income in communities that have traditionally depended on natural resources. Polar tourism also draws on natural landscapes, and new strategies and values are therefore required for balancing out various elements of the local environment. This article provides new insights into the tourism product in Ilulissat, Greenland from the perspective of a dynamic nature/culture relationship, which is a proposed nation brand by the national destination management organization Visitgreenland. The destination of Ilulissat has always been focused around the grand nature surrounding the town—that is, the icefjord that has always shaped life in Ilulissat. The relationship between the icefjord and life around it suggests that nature and culture are closely related, which is useful for tourism purposes. In 2004, the Ilulissat Icefjord was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a natural heritage site, which reinforces tourism categorizations of nature and culture as distinct concepts. The question is how tourism addresses and uses this issue. The Ilulissat tourism operators and administrators provide insight into what is being sold and promoted to tourists. This insight is obtained through interviews with local tourism actors and participant observations of the tourism products and the physical environment in which they exist. The concept of visitability is applied in order to explore the effects of tourism on the core values present in Ilulissat. Findings suggest an imbalance between implicit and explicit relationships between nature and culture, which may challenge tourist experiences and the ability to sustain a unique product in the future.

Introduction

Tourism in polar regions of the world has very much been centred around nature as the main attraction, offering unique possibilities for tourists to experience what is often construed as remote, untouched wilderness and the last tourism frontiers (Hall & Johnston, 1995; Maher, Stewart & Lück, 2011; Müller, Lundmark & Lemelin, 2013; Olwig & Lowenthal, 2006; Snyder & Stonehouse, 2007). Long-standing traditions of scientific research in the harsh, unique, and unspoiled natural environments of polar regions,

together with grand historic expeditions into the polar wilderness and more recent public debates on climate change, have directed much attention toward the uniqueness and significance of natural wonders existing in these polar regions (Lemelin et al., 2010; Maher et al., 2011). All of this reinforces the existing image of polar destinations as nature-driven. In relation to recent years' debates on climate change, a new trend in tourism seems to have emerged, termed "last chance tourism" by Lemelin et al. (2010) and Lemelin, Dawson, and Stewart (2012), which emphasizes the fact that certain natural environments are very fragile and may eventually disappear due to the increased rate of climate change. Tourists then, presumably go to see these places "before it is too late."

In recent decades, tourism has come to offer a means to diversify the economy in polar regions, and nature has particularly become a means to this end (Hall & Saarinen, 2010a; Lemelin et al., 2012; Lemelin & McIntyre in Maher et al., 2011; Müller et al., 2013). However, while tourism to polar regions is growing, these regions often present small, fragile communities that may be faced with heavy tourism influx, and research on tourism in such regions is therefore of growing interest and importance to the communities, local stakeholders, and academics alike (Müller et al., 2013). The extent to which these communities appeal to tourists in conscious and unconscious ways, and the extent to which they change for tourism purposes, has not been explored extensively. This relates to an overall lack of research on the heavy impacts of tourism developments taking place in polar regions as well as consequences thereof.

Ilulissat Icefjord in North Greenland has become a symbol of climate change in action, and the town of Ilulissat has hosted prestigious conferences and meetings on climate change, for example the Arctic Ocean Conference resulting in the Ilulissat Declaration (Danish Foreign Ministry, 2008). In addition, Ilulissat is a dominant tourist destination on the national level in Greenland (Centre for Regional & Tourism Research, CRT), 2013), and it is no exception to the overall dominance of nature attractions in polar tourism. Particularly the Ilulissat Icefjord, which has been a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Site under "natural" properties since 2004, underlines the heavy focus on the destination's nature characteristics in order to market and sell Ilulissat to tourists. Actors involved in Ilulissat tourism (for example tour operators, hotels, and destination management organizations (DMOs)), also heavily promote nature and its significance to Ilulissat as a tourist destination and to society at large (e.g., visitgreenland.dk; worldofgreenland.com; hotelarctic.gl; qaasuitsup.gl). This does not mean that they completely ignore aspects

of “culture” in their promotion, but merely that it takes a secondary role to nature.

The concept of visitability as presented by Dicks (2004) presents a perspective on the destination as an entity that is being presented for consumption and accommodated to visitor needs. In addition, visitability entails a view that sees culture becoming commercial displays for easy consumption by the visitor, rather than “actual” culture being sold; that is, culture is always mediated in a way that gives preference to visitor needs. What visitability thereby offers is a viewpoint of a location, in this case the destination of Ilulissat, that also pays strong attention to the consumption process that tourism inevitably entails. Hereby the combination of nature and culture as it exists in the tourism environment in Ilulissat is visible through the understanding of visitability.

VisitGreenland, the national DMO responsible for the development and promotion of tourism to Greenland, emphasizes the relationship between nature and people as a unique characteristic of Greenland (www.visitgreenland.dk). The nation branding framework “The Pioneering Nation,” introduced in 2010, is based on the following understanding of Greenland: “The key Greenlandic story can be found from the relationship between the power of the nature and people’s pioneering spirit: Powerful & Pioneering” (www.visitgreenland.dk). This suggests an emphasis on nature, and that culture subsequently revolves around and is shaped by nature, which is the proposed brand value and strategic vision of Visitgreenland. However, in a destination like Ilulissat, where the nature focus is strong, the questions are how evident “culture” is, and how the interconnectedness is characterized and comes into play in the context of tourism.

The hypothesis underlying this article is that tourism, in general, emphasizes broad distinctions between culture and nature, rather than the dynamic relationship suggested by Visitgreenland. Based on this distinct categorization, the nature category is dominant in Ilulissat due to the heavy emphasis on the “natural” heritage site, the icefjord. The purpose is therefore to identify the nature/culture relationship, as promoted by Visitgreenland, within tourism in Ilulissat. The research questions that will be explored in the context of Ilulissat as a tourist destination are therefore: How are “nature” and “culture” as distinct categories and interconnected concepts reflected and presented in tourism in Ilulissat? And what are the challenges of these reflections and presentations to Ilulissat as a tourist destination? The aim is to point out tourism practices that may reinforce particular perceptions of the destination, while also making suggestions to direct product development as well as brand positioning. This will be done from the viewpoint of the tourism operators and administrators locally in Ilulissat, which will be used

as a starting point for exploring and understanding the dynamics underlying the way in which they act and thus present Ilulissat to tourists and visitors in general. Thereby, the contribution of this article lies in a specific case study of the tourism operators and administrators at a polar tourism destination, and more specifically in understanding how they affect the nature/culture relationship at a destination heavily focusing on, and getting noticed for, its so-called natural attraction. Consequently, this also relates to a general discussion of tourism as an aspect of community development in polar regions.

This article presents the case of Ilulissat based on a number of methods that will be presented in the next section. Subsequently, the theoretical sections will address essential perspectives on the understanding of the nature/culture relationship in tourism. The concept of visitability is applied as a framework for analysis because it offers a possibility to merge the various ways in which a destination is made accessible to visitors. The analysis and subsequent findings and conclusion are then presented, together with further perspectives to the study.

Methodology

This study qualifies as an observational, qualitative study (Silverman, 2006) of a defined case put into context. The approach to this study is that of a case study of tourism offers promoted and sold to tourists in Ilulissat. The objective is to understand the way in which nature and culture are reflected in tourism in Ilulissat. The point of departure has been to understand the perspective of local tourism operators and administrators, and for this purpose, ethnographic explorations have been employed, and various methods for generating data have been applied.

First, available strategies, reports, administration plans (e.g., by VisitGreenland and the municipal Icefjord office), and websites (local tour operators, public administration) pertaining to tourism in Ilulissat were explored in order to establish a foundation for understanding Ilulissat tourism. Besides functioning as background information in the understanding of the destination and its tourism environment, these documents have also functioned as secondary data for understanding the framing of tourism in Ilulissat. Some of the documents used are directly aimed at tourism, e.g., the national tourism strategies. Other documents are not directed at tourism but nonetheless affect the issues pertaining to this study, e.g., the administration plan for the Ilulissat Icefjord.

The primary data consists of qualitative interviews and participant observations. A total of ten interviews were conducted with local tourism

operators and administrators who, on the basis of desk research, are considered to entail the total number of local tourism operators and administrators. More specifically, four local tour operators, five administrators at the municipality and the Icefjord Office, and one hotel Chief Executive Officer who has direct involvement with the tour operators and who has also been involved in tourism at a national level, constitute the interview data. The interviews took place in June 2013 and were conducted as face-to-face interviews at the interviewees' choice of location in Ilulissat. A semi-structured interview guide pertaining to issues such as the UNESCO site, planning and management, tourism development, product development, and marketing was developed and adapted to each individual interviewee's position as a tour operator, administrator, or hotel CEO, and this formed the basis for the interviews. They were all recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Participant observations were made of the tourism offer presented by various tour operators, and of the town's geography and layout, since a great part of the overall experience is related to and relies on the physical environment, for example, the pathway and entrance to the heritage site as well as the harbour. The observations were distributed equally among operators and tours in the sense that various operators offer similar tours, and this study aimed to observe a variety of tours on offer in the area. The operators were informed of the observations taking place, although the date and time was not specified, and the observer was participating on equal terms with other tourists, which in practice also meant that the observer was essentially a paying customer and, to the extent possible, not recognized as a researcher by other people involved. In addition, local museums that are partly publically and privately driven were also visited and observed as part of the tourism offer. Since the physical environment is a major part of the tourism experience in Ilulissat, scenery, landscapes, and so on were also observed in terms of the ways in which these were accommodating—or not—to tourists; because, as Alasuutari notes, they are "a self-evident part of the study" (1995, p. 178), and particularly in this case very useful in addressing the theoretical concept of visitability. Last, the researcher had a chance to observe an event arranged by the Icefjord Office for the purpose of communicating research around the icefjord to local high school students. Likewise, the national day of Greenland, which took place during the period of collecting data, offered public events around Ilulissat—this offered an opportunity to observe an event that is not at the moment a direct part of the tourism product, but nonetheless informative of the tourism context. These events have been used as secondary observations useful for understanding the framing of the tourism environment in Ilulissat. Field notes were made for

the recollection and systematization of all the observations. The interviews and participant observations are summarized below:

Interviewees:

- Tour Operators: World of Greenland, Tourist Nature, Ice Cap Tours, Ilulissat Xpress
- Administrators: The mayor; a municipal employee responsible for tourism, business, and minerals; the icefjord site manager; a communications employee at the Icefjord Office; and the park ranger of the heritage site
- Hotel CEO: CEO of the largest hotel in Ilulissat and a member of various tourism boards on a national level

Participant observations:

- Tours: Cultural city walks, midnight sailing, sailing among the icebergs, hike to Sermermiut (former settlement in the protected area of the icefjord), sailing visit to Ilimanaq (functioning settlement south of Ilulissat)
- Museum visits: Ilulissat art museum, Ilulissat museum
- Physical environment: Heritage site, harbour, main street in the town centre
- Secondary observations: Icefjord Office outreach event, national day

This data was collected in order to generate meaning, which according to Gray calls for “flexible research methods,” providing data suitable for the theoretical scope of a given study (2003, p. 17). The flexibility in this study lies in a relatively narrow focus on tour operators and administrators, as well as the offer they present to tourists, but with various types of activities explored in this context. The different types of data serve different theoretical and analytical purposes in the overall structure of the study, which is illustrated in figure 1.

Ilulissat as a tourist destination is at the centre of this study, and therefore, various factors frame tourism in Ilulissat, such as UNESCO as a global heritage organization, and Visitgreenland as a national DMO proposing tourism strategies and marketing Greenlandic destinations. At a theoretical level, polar tourism offers some insight into the potential positioning of nature/culture relationships in tourism in Ilulissat, as does heritage conceptualizations and the nature/culture dimensions themselves. In addition, the concept of visitability is added to direct attention towards the destination itself as a potential internal manifestation of external forces such

as nature/culture categorization, for example when tourism products are edited according to outside stereotypes and expectations. Data is therefore applied according to its relevance to each theoretical level and attachment to the external factors: Visitgreenland and UNESCO. Consequently, the data analysis is conducted as an ad hoc meaning creation (Kvale, 1997) through an iterative process in which theoretical themes have inspired data analysis, and data have inspired the application of theory, and the process in itself becomes an analytical method.

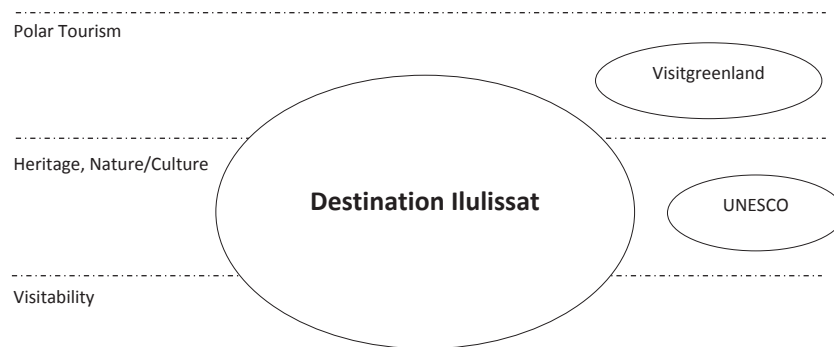


Figure 1. Approach to the Case: Destination Ilulissat

This study offers a perspective on how tourism offers present nature and culture at the destination of Ilulissat, but it also entails some limitations. It represents a first step in the exploration of this topic, where other steps can and should be added in the future. For example, a more community-centred focus seems sensible when speaking of this particular topic, as would a tourist focus. However, the study takes on more of a business management oriented perspective to a topic that is most often viewed from a socio-cultural perspective, due to the exact fact that it gives a rather unusual angle to a complex issue that is not isolated from other actors and interests around it. The aim has therefore been to look specifically at how tourism businesses in Ilulissat involved in activities essentially promoting and selling Ilulissat as a tourist destination approach the presentation of nature/culture relations in Ilulissat. It is therefore a deliberate choice to limit the study to this particular perspective, although other perspectives are acknowledged and could be equally interesting while giving entirely different angles and conclusions to the topic at hand. This study can therefore also be considered a first step in the exploration of this topic from a very particular perspective, because this is the key to understanding why Ilulissat has become, and might remain or further develop, as a tourist destination.

Tourism in Ilulissat

In Greenland, tourism is a growing industry and part of a national development strategy¹ that focuses on further developing industries in growth, among these tourism as an alternative to declining income from the fishing industry (Government of Greenland, 2011). This has been the case since 1991 when tourism was first part of the development strategy (Kaae, 2002), and since then tourism has increased, as in many other Arctic destinations (Müller et al., 2013). Ilulissat in particular has strong incentives to maintain a focus on tourism, which has been an important source of income for the last couple of decades (Qaasuitsup Municipality, 2014). Ilulissat is the single most visited destination in Greenland, receiving approximately one-third of all tourists coming to Greenland (CRT, 2013; Statistics Greenland, 2012; Kaae & Råhede in Maher et al., 2011), and must be considered important for tourism to Greenland overall. However, particular challenges pertaining to a relatively short summer season (July and August), short stays, and lack of local involvement continue to call for new ways of making tourism prosper, particularly to the benefit of the local community (CRT, 2013). Ilulissat is a town of 4,558 inhabitants (Qaasuitsup Municipality, 2014). With approximately 35,000 tourists a year (Statistics Greenland, 2012) in a relatively short period of time, it must be assumed that their presence in the local community is noticeable. The basis for tourism in Ilulissat is the Ilulissat Icefjord in close proximity to the town, which provides direct access to the icefjord, as illustrated in figure 2.

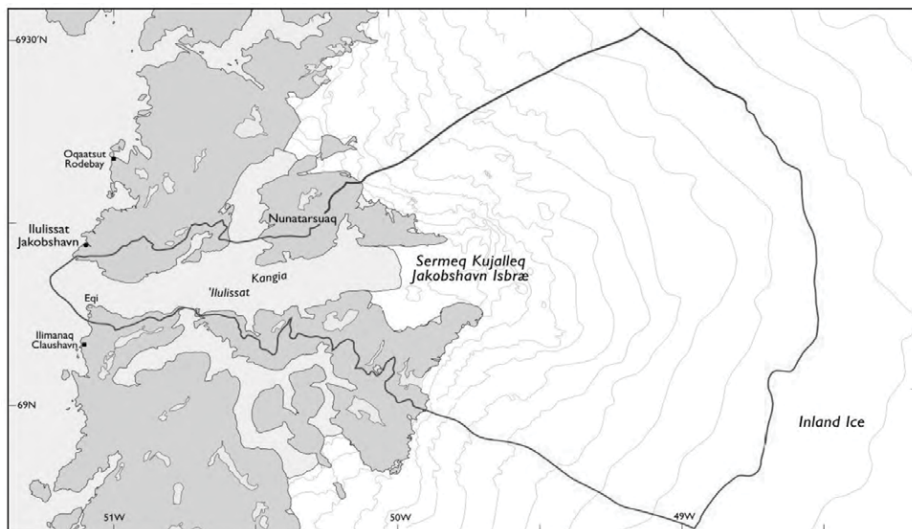


Figure 2. Map of Ilulissat Icefjord area. (Source: Qaasuitsup Municipality & the Greenland Home Rule, 2009, p. 4.)

Due to the distinct characteristics of the icefjord, Ilulissat is a prime example of nature constituting the dominant attraction, and everything else being more or less secondary or relative to nature. For example, VisitGreenland, which is responsible for marketing Greenland and the different towns and regions, announces on their website the following: “The dull thud of the icebergs mixes with the howls of the thousands of sled dogs in Ilulissat—a town in which nature never sleeps” (www.visitgreenland.dk). In other words, nature is used in a very direct manner to present and promote the destination, and culture is not obviously included as a factor of attraction. Similar examples can be found in the data generated for this study. For example, one of the tour operators in Ilulissat makes the following statement:

This [the icefjord] is why people come here, it gets sold. The vast majority of our tours have something to do with the icefjord. If you sail, hike, or fly, the icefjord is involved. Then we have a bit of a different product up north, which means a lot to us, but overall for Ilulissat it is the icefjord that attracts, no doubt about that. (Tour operator, Ilulissat, 12 June 2013, author’s translation)

This characterization resembles what Weidenfeld (2010) refers to as a flagship attraction due to the icefjord’s ability to attract visitors on the basis of its “must-see” qualities, its scale, and its economic impact—estimated to be 63.5 million DKK a year (Ilulissat Icefjord Office). An iconic attraction—another categorization used by Weidenfeld (2010)—is focused on symbolic representations of the place in which it is situated, including references to culture and heritage, which also resemble much of the icefjord’s portrayal. This article therefore rests on an underlying assumption that the product offered to tourists is affected by this label of a “natural attraction” with flagship as well as iconic characteristics, and that the potential that may lie in other aspects of the destination is not exposed to the full extent due to this rather explicit announcement of “nature” and extremely implicit and almost invisible approach to “culture.” One of the challenges, according to the interviewees, is to present “culture” that is distinctive to Ilulissat and not only to Greenland in general. The Indigenous people of Greenland, Greenland Inuit, make up the vast majority of the population in Greenland, about 90%; about 5% of the population is Danish and 5% is other nationalities (Statistics Greenland, 2013). The Inuit culture in more general terms is found all over Greenland, but in this respect it seems possible to utilize the proximity to the icefjord exactly as a tool to understand and present distinct Ilulissat culture, which might emphasize the icefjord as a flagship attraction, while also enhancing the cultural uniqueness of the Ilulissat tourism product.

Nature and Culture in Tourism—The Emphasis on Nature in Polar Tourism

In Western civilizations the distinction between culture and nature has been emphasized by definitions pertaining to human-made and nature-made characteristics. As Smith (2003) stipulates regarding heritage sites, architecture, monuments, and historical buildings are perceived as culture, and wilderness and physical landscapes as nature. The global tourism industry is largely Western in the sense that the vast majority of tourism is generated in the West, tourists are often Western, and so are many tourism businesses (Weaver & Lawton, 2006). The tourism industry itself, moreover, emphasizes nature/culture distinctions due to issues of market segmentation, the very purpose of which is to emphasize certain characteristics of a market segment and inherent preferences. For instance, while determining main motivational factors of attraction within a particular segment, secondary motivations of different types are very often ignored (Pearce & Lee, 2005). Saarinen (2005) also addresses the contention that the idea of “wilderness” is reinforced by tourism in that it becomes part of the consumption process. In addition, it can be claimed that the commoditization that tourism businesses logically rely on tends to create some level of categorization of products, such as cultural and natural tourism experiences, to which tourists in general have also become accustomed (Dicks, 2003). This inevitably translates into presentations of one-dimensional destinations, although this is not necessarily intentional or beneficial to tourism businesses or other stakeholders. Saarinen (2005) further points out that tourism has contributed to the reinvention of the wilderness concept, and that media and marketing to a great extent project the largely western notion of an “untouched and human-free” natural landscape as ultimate wilderness. He further points out that wilderness as a concept is highly mediated and therefore constitutes a cultural rather than a natural landscape (Saarinen, 2005).

Because of the separation of culture and nature to which western tourists and businesses have become accustomed and tourism in some ways reinforces, it has become somewhat of a given for any tourism business and DMO to engage in discourse treating culture and nature as separate attractions and tourist experiences, although occasionally complementary. However, a question arises when the nature/culture distinction is put into a destination context such as Ilulissat, in which nature is dominant and cultural aspects of the destination are heavily influenced by and entangled in nature such that culture becomes extremely implicit. Culture and nature are intimately linked due to the harshness of the natural environment in polar regions, which forces human populations to adapt (Olwig & Lowenthal, 2006). There

is also an immediate connection between the mediated natural landscapes in tourism related communications and the cultural representations of them that Saarinen (2005) addresses. Therefore it becomes very difficult and to some extent irrelevant to make the actual distinction. However, it is argued here that tourism projects the idea that culture and nature are distinct while also heavily mediating nature with culturally loaded—often Western—values, for example, of human-free environments and remoteness.

The focus on tourism in polar destinations is increasing in both academic literature and in the tourism industry in general (Hall & Saarinen, 2010b). Because research on polar tourism—tourism to Arctic and Antarctic regions—is a growing field, research is also getting closer to a characterization of polar tourism as distinct from tourism to other regions. This has been described in recent literature, and in this regard, it is continuously confirmed that nature is the main attraction of polar tourism (Hall & Johnston, 1995; Lemelin et al., 2012; Maher et al., 2011; Müller et al., 2013; Olwig & Lowenthal, 2006; Snyder & Stonehouse, 2007). Tourists come to experience nature in the shape of what is perceived as wilderness, untouched landscapes, and a last tourism frontier, which is increasingly difficult to encounter in more established tourist destinations—at least by the meanings of “untouched and human-free” (Saarinen, 2005). It is also quite clear in this literature that culture is a secondary motivational factor for tourists to polar destinations (CRT, 2013; Maher et al., 2011; Müller et al., 2013), and culture seems to be mentioned most often in relation to nature (Johnston in Maher et al., 2011), which indicates a close yet complex relationship between the two. As Johnston states in regards to polar tourism in general:

Regardless of the form tourism takes, the chief attraction is the existence of a landscape which has alluring wilderness qualities. Within the overall appeal of the wilderness, there are numerous elements of the local environment which are attractions in and of themselves. (Johnston in Hall & Johnston, 1995, p. 27)

The emphasis on nature in polar tourism is hereby underlined, while it is also recognized that a number of related elements are also a secondary part of the attraction—elements that may be of a “cultural” scope.

This may very well be brought on by the prevailing ethnocentrism in tourism (Saarinen, 2005; Smed, 2011; Weaver & Lawton, 2006), which positions tourism in a frame of reference that expects and promotes categories such as cultural versus natural tourism products. Such categorizations are perhaps obvious to make in many continental European destinations, but

do not really suit other types of tourism regions, such as the polar regions, due to the role that nature plays in such communities (Hansson, 2012; Olwig & Lowenthal, 2006). Therefore, whether or not there is potential to address this in a different way in Ilulissat is a question that needs to be explored, as well as why this may or may not offer new perspectives to understanding tourism in Ilulissat.

Heritage and the Culture/Nature Relationship

Tourism and heritage are intrinsically linked as “heritage production involves both salvaging the past, and staging it as a visitable experience” (Dicks, 2004, p. 119), and as such caters for tourist desires to experience and understand their own past (Smith, 2003; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Tourism and heritage co-exist in a paradoxical relationship that on the one hand seeks to present “authentic” culture, while also accommodating visitor demands (Dicks, 2004; Lyon & Wells, 2012; Smith, 2003). As such, it serves various purposes for local communities as well as for tourism businesses and tourists. According to the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), which is an international network responsible for cultural heritage, heritage is defined as:

... a broad concept and includes the natural as well as the cultural environment. It encompasses landscapes, historic places, sites and built environments, as well as biodiversity, collections, past and continuing cultural practice, knowledge and living experiences. It records and expresses the long processes of historic development, forming the essence of diverse national, regional, indigenous and local identities and is an integral part of modern life. It is a dynamic reference point and positive instrument for growth and change. The particular heritage and collective memory of each locality or community is irreplaceable and an important foundation for development both now and in the future. (ICOMOS, 1999)

This definition emphasizes the meaning and significance of heritage to a given locality. In doing so, it also includes environments defined and distinguished as natural and cultural. In relation to the case of Ilulissat, this becomes a noticeable observation due to the contention that nature and culture are very closely linked, particularly from the perspective of cultural practice or what may also be termed intangible culture (Smith, 2003) or anthropological culture (Dicks, 2004), as opposed to tangible culture (Smith, 2003) or hierarchical culture (Dicks, 2004), which then opens up for a broader interpretation of what may qualify as heritage. Heyd (2003) speaks of a more

linguistic origin of culture meaning “the activity of working the land and creating places for living there” (p. 130), which merges culture directly with nature.

Reviewing existing definitions and perceptions of the relationship between cultural and natural heritage, and the dynamics of this relationship, does not provide a clear picture of how these relate to each other; on the contrary, the impression is that this is a highly complex relationship, which is very dependent on the context in which it is explored (Heyd, 2003; Olwig & Lowenthal, 2006; Smith, 2003). A direction more and more apparent in research points toward the merging of the two concepts rather than treating culture and nature as opposites (Heyd, 2003), mainly due to the perception that no space in the world is untouched or wild, which means that nature is affected by culture one way or another (Dicks, 2004; Saarinen, 2005). Another contention, which is particularly emphasized in relation to tourism, is that because nature is heavily mediated, for example through the positioning of polar regions as remote wilderness, peripheral destinations, and last frontiers (Müller & Jansson, 2007), an individual will always relate to nature in a cultured way (Smith, 2003; Wilson, 1992). Therefore, nature and culture only exist together by their framing of each other.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee, administering the World Heritage List on which the Ilulissat Icefjord was inscribed in 2004, plays a role in these perceptions as heritage with the World Heritage List has become a global phenomenon (Smith, 2003). UNESCO defines cultural and natural heritage respectively and thereby clearly demarcates how these are to be understood in nominations for the list:

Cultural heritage refers to monuments, groups of buildings and sites with historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value. Natural heritage refers to outstanding physical, biological and geological formations, habitats of threatened species of animals and plants and areas with scientific, conservation or aesthetic value. (www.whc.unesco.org)

From this perspective, only material culture seems to be included on the list and, as such, only one view of culture is represented and promoted, which will be addressed shortly. The mere fact that the list has been divided into “cultural,” “natural,” and “mixed” properties, the latter also named cultural landscapes (Smith, 2003), indicates a separation of cultural and natural heritage, even if they can be “mixed.” This is also backed up by Dicks (2004) who speaks of the “culturalization of nature” (p. 110) positioned as

sites of cultural consumption because the wilderness aspect of such sites are reinforced for the purposes of offering a unique contrast to the modern life of (Western) tourists. UNESCO acknowledges the overlaps between culture and nature, but still from a rather categorical perspective. In light of these categories, it is striking that UNESCO emphasizes the overlap of culture and nature as “the most significant feature of the 1972 World Heritage Convention” on which the World Heritage List is based. UNESCO states on their website:

The most significant feature of the 1972 World Heritage Convention is that it links together in a single document the concepts of nature conservation and the preservation of cultural properties. The Convention recognizes the way in which people interact with nature, and the fundamental need to preserve the balance between the two. (www.whc.unesco.org)

As such, it seems paradoxical to operate with the above mentioned culture and nature categories, but there may very well be explanations to be found in the fact that various perceptions of culture are at play. The quote indicates recognition of a merging between culture and nature, but culture in the sense of interaction, that is, anthropological or non-material culture. This is in contrast to the previous quote in which hierarchical, material culture seemed to be underlined. As Smith (2003) points out, the need for different types of sites on the list has increased over the years, due to changing perceptions of what qualifies as heritage, and an imbalance has emerged due to these new types of perceptions calling for the inscription of other types of sites on the heritage list. Also, non-material culture is becoming very popular in tourism terms as it is translated into heritage as living history (Dicks, 2004), which refers directly to the cultural practice mentioned above. Therefore it seems that a less rigid understanding and usage of culture in a non-material, anthropological form may challenge the perception of Ilulissat as a so-called nature destination and a natural heritage site.

By speaking of nature/culture distinctions, categories drawing on differences and opposition are reinforced, but it makes sense to do so due to prevailing categorizations in the tourism industry, such as general ethnocentrism and the influence of global standards such as the World Heritage List. Therefore, such categories will be used as points of reference in a tourism context, while the close, dynamic relationship between culture and nature will also be addressed. The purpose is thus to understand both relationships as they exist throughout this study.

Visitability as a Framework

For the purpose of addressing the connection between the destination and the visiting tourists, the concept of visitability is related to culture—also entailing nature—as presented by Dicks (2004), and applied to the context of Ilulissat. It is a concept that addresses the inevitability of the standardization that becomes part of modern consumption of places once tourists are taken into consideration; that is, once there is a co-dependence between tourism and destination interests. Dicks (2004) presents arguments pertaining to visitors' consumption of cultural display and cultural representations more than the actual culture at the destination. What "actual" culture is, is a crucial point to this argument, and in this study, culture is defined according to the statements made by interviewees, which makes this point less definitive. Nonetheless, the argument that Dicks (2004) presents suggests that the presence of visitors has a direct connection to the way culture is displayed and represented; that is, in a way that is assumed to accommodate visitors in the best possible way:

When they [people who travel] arrive at a place marked out as a destination, visitors expect to be offered interesting and condensed sites of cultural display that allow them to glimpse immediately the "essence" of the local life-world. These may be seen as a prelude to or, perhaps more often, a substitute for venturing out into the disorganized spaces of that world themselves. (Dicks, 2004, p. 4)

Entailed in this statement is first of all an underlying assumption of standardization in that "marked out as a destination" implies a particular, recognizable way of doing so, and second of all an assumption of a certain accepted superficiality and ease in the form of displayed cultural experiences rather than cultural encounters, which may be more difficult to obtain and understand instantaneously. This is similar to the popular conception of pseudo-events that Boorstin introduced in 1964, which rests on a hypothesis that encountering "real" culture is impossible in a tourism context due to the fact that cultural practices are altered by the mere presence of tourists, because practices become performances. Although Boorstin's contention may very well rest on a particular understanding of culture and authenticity that has been criticized since then, and which may, in more recent debates, have taken many different directions (see e.g., Wang, 1999), there is something to be said about the fact that culture is being (re)presented in certain ways through display that is most likely moulded and interpreted by a select few, leaving questions of what, who, and how it is represented open

for discussion (Smith, 2003). When the demand side, the tourist visitors, are taken into consideration for business purposes, it is possible that actual cultural encounters are left unnoticed or unexplored due to the fact that they are overruled by assumptions that tourists will expect easily-accessible cultural displays (and employed visitability) that outline the destination in a predetermined way—thus increasing the level of standardization and the assumed ease with which visitors are able to navigate around the destination's cultural landscape and identity.

Hereby, visitability in practice potentially poses a threat to the perceived uniqueness and authenticity of the cultural product at a destination, and possibly disappoints tourist expectations. However, this of course depends on the particular images that tourist expectations rest on, both organic images—such as public debates, which the destination does not have much control over—and induced images, where deliberate attempts of attracting tourists through particular means are applied (Gunn, 1997). Thus, projected images, as mentioned before, play a role influencing tourist expectations, motivations, behaviour, and consequences at a given destination, as well as the tourist experience that is taken home and evaluated by the tourists (Jenkins, 2003).

A further point to stress in connection to the tourist experience and the concept of visitability is that nature, which was once seen as untouched and opposed to culture, is increasingly becoming a visitable space, in the sense that it has become part of the modern escape from everyday life, which tourism reinforces (Dicks, 2004). In relation to polar regions this may be emphasized by the fact that what has previously been perceived as vast and untouched natural landscapes increasingly come across as populated and cultural spaces since tourists may encounter other tourists or signs of human presence in what may be expected to be natural, wild landscapes; as such, these destinations may fail to live up to the tourist's expectations of their experience.

For example, the number of helicopter tours has increased in the Ilulissat area, and particularly in the protected areas (The Administration Plan for the World Heritage Area Ilulissat Icefjord, 2009), which obviously may have certain environmental consequences over time, but which may also affect the tourist experience in the sense that more helicopter rides equals more noise, more people, and possibly more visible signs of people (e.g., traffic signs) in an environment where isolation, desolate landscape, and nature's silence or natural sounds are the main attraction. It may be argued that this is a rather one-sided understanding of nature due to the fact that people have always existed in and with nature and thereby culture is directly connected

to nature. Nonetheless, it is hereby argued that mechanisms in tourism reinforce that distinction as well as a particular understanding of what gives nature attraction value. This is not necessarily the same for all tourists, but vis-à-vis the previous discussion of various target segments only focusing on primary motivations, there is a tendency for grand nature attractions to become one-sided.

There are certain indications by which the presence of visitability can be assessed, and the following sections will address examples of how these apply to the case of Ilulissat. The study thus seeks to apply visitability as a concept that ties together the nature/culture relationship and tourism practices at a destination level.

Visitability in Ilulissat

The assessment of visitability entails three main factors according to Dicks (2004): legibility, standardization of cultural display, and cultural display of nature. Dicks (2004) speaks of legibility, or “talking environments,” which contribute to making a place accessible, understandable, and inviting for the visitor; or, in other words, whether a destination is mapped out to be visitor-friendly. In the case of Ilulissat, the interviews and observations both revealed that a lot of information is implicit and provided only when actively pursued by tourists, for example when asking directions or looking for activities in the area. It seems that a paradox exists between new initiatives to guide visitors—evident through increased, although still scarce, signage provided by tourism actors—and structural challenges, such as a lack of central communications and co-operation as illustrated in this comment by a local tour operator:

We really want these cultural experiences here in Greenland as well ... If it was possible to plan ahead and tell people, this and that weekend we expect a dog sled race, or this is the weekend we'll host the Greenlandic championships, and this is what is going to happen on national day—I expect to get the programme the day before, but that's not good enough. (Tour operator, Ilulissat, 12 June 2013, author's translation)

This example also entails an indication of conflicts between commercial and non-commercial interests in Ilulissat (that is, those concerned with tourism income, tour operators, and those who are not, in this case the local authorities), which are working towards different ends, and as such work against legibility for tourists.

Another issue to note in terms of cultural experiences is exemplified by the following quote:

That thing up in Eqi, I would definitely call that a cultural experience. The icefjord is not the primary issue, the settlement² is [visited on the same trip]. That the icefjord is close by is of course a factor in attracting people to exactly this place, of course. (Tour operator, Ilulissat, 12 June 2013, own translation)

This persistent relation to the icefjord may be the result of attempts to accommodate perceived expectations of what constitutes cultural experiences, as previously demonstrated, rather than actually lacking the foundation for experiences of various sorts. As it turns out, mainly non-material forms of culture are referred to when attempting to speak of cultural products—in line with indications found in the literature—such as ways of living rather than artifacts (such as clothes, tools, art etc.), which is pertinent to destinations in which nature is a significant influence. This comes across quite clearly in a statement from a tour operator: “Culture is and will always be letting Greenlandic people live their daily lives, and us tagging along on the sideline” (Tour operator, Ilulissat, 13 June 2013, own translation).

Additional observations of the physical environment were also made in terms of this lack of information, for example in the fact that signs are scarce and information in general is not obviously articulated to visitors. After being a participant observer in Ilulissat for a period of time, it seems very evident that things such as navigating around town and finding people and places requires a level of tacit knowledge, not readily available to tourists. This adds to a relatively low level of legibility in comparison to an established destination, such as those one expects to find in Europe.

A second indication of visitability is that some level of standardization is expected since visitors become accustomed, based on their experiences from other places previously visited, to certain ways that destinations make things visitable. Tourists come to expect such standards in all touristic places. Standardization in Ilulissat is to some extent provided by the fact that the icefjord is on the World Heritage List, which sets it up as a global standard. Another issue that suggests standardization is the negative expectations of tour operators to tourist visitors’ needs and demands, as exemplified by the quote below, addressing the issue of previous products no longer available for tourists due to negative experiences in the past. At the time, this allegedly caused tourists to be unhappy with the experience provided for them, and the tour operator to reconsider this product, which contained a visit to a local family:

They visited a young, local family, she is an accountant, and he works at the airport, and in their imagination they probably imagined that they were to visit a housewife sitting on the kitchen floor with a seal, and a hunter coming home with a few seals, but that is not the real Greenland. (Local tour operator, 12 June 2013, own translation)

This quote reinforces expectations on behalf of this tour operator towards tourists' standardized and stereotypical expectations, which was a tendency detected among several tour operators and also used as explanations for choosing and not choosing what to promote and sell what they themselves would call cultural products. Such views of tourist perceptions seem to have affected the product development to a certain extent, and potentially in direction of more standardized and predictable products.

Last, making nature a place to visit by giving it a human face is, according to Dicks (2004), a way of interpreting and mediating nature for tourists. In Ilulissat, nature is given a human face, for example by the heritage site guiding and assisting visitors' experiences. Examples of this are evident at the entrance to the icefjord from the town: the visitor is directed where to walk as well as where to stop and enjoy the view, which is indicated by a pathway leading up to a viewpoint with a bench and a sign inviting people to undertake this activity. Likewise, this was also done in a less direct way at a museum exhibit, where effects of climate change were stated by various local citizens. One statement says: "you can no longer walk on the sea ice, but at the same time you cannot sail either. It is of no use now. Autumn storms have become more frequent. Therefore it has become more difficult to catch the halibut" (Ilulissat Museum, climate change exhibition, June 2013). Thereby, direct consequences for people's lives, of the environment in which they live, are used as a way of interpreting nature, and in doing so gives nature a human face. One might note, though, that climate change has been an issue often attached to Ilulissat due to the icefjord's perceived environmental fragility and various meetings and debates taking place here, and therefore, it may be an attempt to use that profile towards various ends: Information, visitor generation, or other. As such, this may also accommodate expected needs or demands, although the presence of this exhibit at the museum may suggest a less commercial purpose.

All in all, visitability is evident to some extent in the tourism product of Ilulissat, although there are also features pointing in another direction. The tourism product in Ilulissat is no doubt emphasizing nature, and perceptions of how nature should be adapted to the presence of tourists exist, that is,

visitability is applied. On the other hand, the recognition of culture as part of nature and as an explicit feature of the destination is less evident, and it is used more implicitly for the purpose of promotion and visitability purposes.

Conclusion

What then can be said about how the culture/nature relationship plays into the tourism product in Ilulissat? The culture/nature relationship is, in many ways not surprisingly, recognized by local actors to be close-knit—it seems almost a given in, no need of explanation. This is further reinforced by VisitGreenland's branding strategy of "The Pioneering Nation" (www.visitgreenland.dk) focusing on the people of Greenland communing with nature as opposed to many of the visitors. Despite this recognition of a unique and dynamic relationship, a categorization is attempted, as is naming the experiences provided for tourists as distinctly cultural or natural.

The relationship between nature and culture in the Ilulissat product is characterized by certain paradoxes in that dynamics are recognized and explicated while categorizations are also present. There is no doubt that nature takes precedence over culture in a rather direct and explicit way in Ilulissat's attraction as a destination. However, culture is viewed implicitly as an inherent part of nature, which is to some extent presented as a given by the local actors involved. Culture is, however, less obvious in the physical environment and the products presented to tourists, which may present challenges to the tourists' experience of place considering their unfamiliarity with these dynamics. This therefore also reinforces the characterization of the nature/culture relationship in Ilulissat as somewhat uneven to the tourist eye, although perhaps perceived as dynamic by the internal actors. As a result, this may present challenges in aligning internal understandings of the product with external understandings and expectations. Moreover, internal actors seem to reinforce this uneven relationship by ignoring tourist expectations of a cultural dimension of the product, simply because the natural dimension is perceived as easier to promote and sell, while also fully living up to expectations as perceived by the internal actors. The analysis also shows that culture in Ilulissat tourism is addressed in such a way that it holds the destination and its products in a firm grip within the constraints of what is perceived sellable and visitable. It is therefore suggested that the bias towards promoting the nature dimension, and reinforcing it through existing perceptions of the product that constitutes Ilulissat as a tourist destination and expectations of it, is addressed through a more balanced view of a nature/culture relationship. This will require rethinking the core values of the Ilulissat product in order to develop and strengthen new

dimensions within the product. Entailed in this also lies a suggestion of going against the standardization of place that visitability presents, because it does not capture the essence of a destination. Therefore, it would be beneficial to explore the unique core values of Ilulissat and stress them for tourist purposes. This would also mean potentially addressing the long-term challenge for businesses to stand out from the competition, which brand propositions and marketing also assist, but which first and foremost comes from a product development initiative. In addition, anchoring the tourist product more directly in the local community, rather than the physical, natural surroundings, would also present possibilities for strengthening Ilulissat as a tourist destination in the future.

Further Perspectives

Visitgreenland already points out the culture/nature relationship as a particular focal point for tourism to Greenland. However, the strategic use of this unique selling point appears not to be used and taken advantage of at a strong and important destination like Ilulissat. This unique selling point is therefore a potentially unexplored possibility in more ways than one. When trying to meet the challenges of short stays and a short season, different offers and images could attract new visitors and new patterns of behaviour, perhaps overcoming some of the present challenges. This may furthermore be a way to meet the challenge of increasing local involvement through a bottom-up approach to product development and place branding. There is a chance that a more direct, local profiling of the place that constitutes the destination of Ilulissat would have to involve local engagement to a greater extent, which means direct dependency on locals and, accordingly, efforts put into this task on the premises of local citizens. For several years now, issues pertaining to the tourist experience have dominated discussions of how to create or reshape tourism products to meet the needs of rapidly changing tourism markets (see e.g., Jensen, 1999; Mossberg, 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). However, in many cases it seems that tourist experiences become isolated from the context in which they exist due to existing stigmatized perceptions of tourists; this is also present in Ilulissat. This goes against the fact that the point at hand for theorists dealing with tourist experiences is to create full experiences; that is, the incentive is to create the foundation for a complete and cohesive experience, rather than fragmented bits and pieces that do not feed into each other.

It is clear that the Ilulissat Icefjord offers a strong attraction for tourists, mainly due to its strong image as a unique but also fragile natural phenomenon, which is promoted through the listing as a World Heritage

Site, and also through the discussions on climate change, that somehow seem to work against itself by reinforcing one element that comes to stand alone. It is therefore also important to keep in mind the potential attraction value ascribed to local cultural traits as they exist and have existed for several thousand years together with this natural attraction, and as such culture and nature have affected each other.

Therefore, it is essential for a continued tourist interest in this destination to keep the whole spectrum of possible attractions intact. In order to do so, it is also essential to involve the local community, which possesses the human attraction at the destination, and which thus accounts for a big part of the interaction between people that is often highly valued by tourists. Evidently, one way of projecting uniqueness is by maintaining cultural characteristics and identity, which in the case of Ilulissat is directly connected to the natural attraction of the icefjord due to the fact that it is a central component of the local community and gives an obvious unique selling point to potential tourists. As such, it can be said that VisitGreenland's "pioneering nation" needs to become more apparent in Ilulissat.

Lastly, it may be necessary to stress the fact that at this point in time it seems that Ilulissat is in no danger of losing tourism income. However, the cultural dynamics that always entail change and adaptation to circumstances may be a different story, because tourism has sped up the process and possibly not for the benefit of the local community—at least not long term. Although the intentions of the World Heritage Programme may be to preserve heritage in all its shapes and forms, it also seems to contribute to possible degradation of heritage in a destination such as Ilulissat, and also in other places around the world in which the presence of tourists is very evident and noticeable (Smith, 2003).

At a general level, it may be said that there are ethical issues to be considered in the relationship between the tourism industry and local cultures, but from the point of view of tourists, it is also crucial to keep differences intact, even though some will claim that tourists are increasingly similar around the world and thus demand much the same things (Dicks, 2004). It is nonetheless clear throughout the history of modern tourism that changing demands always appear, and that over time tourist demands become more and more diversified (Smed, 2011). Perhaps for this particular reason it becomes increasingly valuable and thereby necessary to preserve uniqueness where it is found, and polar tourism has a possibility to stand out in the distinct dynamics of culture and nature in combination.

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Notes

1. It is important to note that in a tourism context Greenland is completely independent from Denmark, although there are close ties to Denmark in many areas of politics.
2. A settlement in a Greenlandic context refers to a small village usually in relative isolation from other communities. Due to the geography and landscape of Greenland, there are no roads connecting communities to each other, and the infrastructure is therefore based largely on air- and waterways. This affects ways of living all over Greenland, but in particular in these small settlements, and therefore they present a rather different cultural experience than the larger communities in Greenland.

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